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COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & PUBLIC WORKS

Hearing on the Use of Oil Dispersants in the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
OPENING STATEMENT
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I want to thank Chairman Boxer and Chairman Whitehouse for holding this critical hearing on dispersant use in response to the BP *Deepwater Horizon* Oil Spill.

On April 20 of this year, the BP *Deepwater Horizon* exploded and began this nation's greatest manmade environmental disaster. This catastrophe claimed 11 lives and has left thousands of others in turmoil across the Gulf Coast region. Our hearts and prayers go out to the families of those who died in the BP *Deepwater Horizon* explosion and to the hardworking Americans whose jobs and ways of life are threatened.

As an oil slick spread across the Gulf, threatening damage to the \$2.4 billion fisheries industry as well as wetlands, beaches, and shipping routes one thing became painfully clear—we know a lot more about how to drill an oil well than we know about how to stop one from spewing oil or how to clean up the mess.

We have all watched a series of science experiments-- the top hats and the top kills-- unfold on underwater seacams. We've studied the diagrams in the newspapers and looked to experts on TV to explain what's happening 5,000 feet below the surface of the sea. Our hopes and expectations have gone up and down like yoyos as some attempts failed, some worked a little bit and finally, the flow of oil may be stopped for good.

But it's not just in their efforts to cap the well that responders were forced to make decisions on the fly with too little information about what works and what doesn't.

Since the spill began, somewhere in the neighborhood of 1.8 million gallons of chemical dispersants were applied in the Gulf. These chemicals break the oil into smaller droplets. In that form it mixes and dilutes into the water column rather than floating on the surface in a big slick. The rationale we've been given is that damage to the organisms in the water column is a lesser evil than damage to the wetlands and the birds and fish that live and breed in them.

Sadly, there is shockingly little to back up those claims. The number of facts we possess about these chemicals is far outweighed by the number of unanswered questions. Here are just a few.

- We have only this past Monday begun to get answers about how toxic these chemicals are when mixed with oil.

- We do not know whether breaking the oil up makes it more or less available to fish and other marine animals.
- We do not know how to track or clean up the plumes of oil that the dispersants have helped push under the surface.
- We don't know what impact these plumes will have on the ecosystem and the food chain of the Gulf over the long-term.
- We very little information about the effect of dispersants applied 5,000 feet below the sea as this was the first time it has ever been done.

The constant refrain we have heard is that dispersants present us with a tradeoff: protecting the more environmentally sensitive wetlands and marshes and the species they nurture versus the subsurface water column. But with so little known about dispersants and their impact on the ecosystem as a whole, I don't know how responders could have effectively evaluated the risks and come to this judgment.

This committee has reported an important bill that would guarantee funding to study and develop better response technologies, including more research into dispersants. I am a proud co-sponsor of Senator Lautenberg's Safe Dispersants Act which would require more rigorous testing before using dispersants in the future. These are important legislative responses to the disparity between drilling technology and response technology.

But while these efforts to look forward are important, we need to be sure that BP and its partners are held responsible for the damage dispersed oil will cause to the environment, much of which may not be evident until months or even years in the future.

The Water and Wildlife Subcommittee that I chair has begun oversight of the process for assessing and repairing damage to natural resources and for holding BP and its partners responsible to pay for it. As we seek to understand and document the damage that's been done to the Gulf, it is critical that the impacts of dispersants and dispersed oil are front and center. That is the only way we can be sure we will restore the health of the Gulf Coast region and a cherished way of life to its people.